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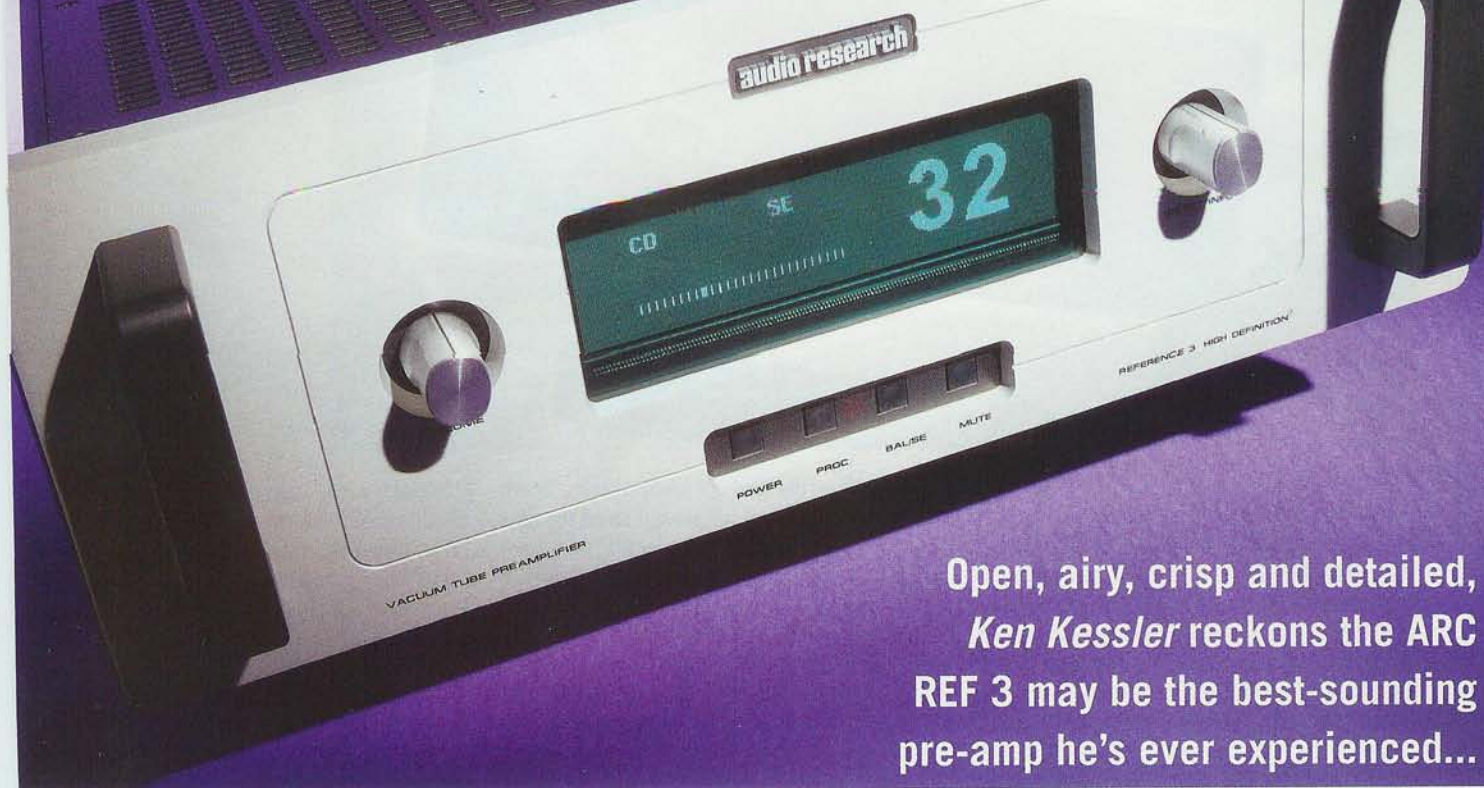
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ARC de
Triomphe?Hi-Fi News
EXCLUSIVE

Open, airy, crisp and detailed, *Ken Kessler* reckons the ARC REF 3 may be the best-sounding pre-amp he's ever experienced...

Audio Research REF3

PRICE £9250

Obsessing over trivia is a journalist's stock in trade. Yes, it's infantile, but sometimes there's more to it than at first it seems. Take attacks made by automotive journalists on BMW's iDrive control system, which relegated all manner of operations to a single 'joystick' and LCD screen. They pointed out that 1) using it was impossible without taking your eyes off the road, unlike tactile buttons you can 'learn', and 2) simple actions like changing the cabin temperature meant sifting through seven menus. They weren't being trivial: BMW deserved it.

So now the Audio Research Corporation, one of my all-time favourite hi-fi manufacturers, has committed a similar *faux pas*. And I simply cannot let it go, *even though it is entirely subjective*. Why? Because – aside from it being a gross lapse in taste, an absolute misreading of the ergonomic preferences of the sort of audiophiles who buy circa-£10k components – its REF3 just may be the best-sounding pre-amp I've ever experienced. That's why this gaffe is so, so aggravating.

One of ARC's strongest characteristics (and genuine virtues) has been its absolute refusal to choose form over function. More importantly, the no-nonsense approach has become an actual selling point, creating its own inimitable aesthetic.

What is that aesthetic? A laboratory look, silver or black metal front plates, with or without handles, large knobs and, below them, proper switches. Those slender, elegant toggles gave way to small, 'soft touch', square press buttons some time ago, also an unfortunate move, but it's minor compared to the desecration of the image as evinced by the REF3's front panel. Gone are all but two rotaries, for accessing the 104-step volume control and seven inputs, while four

having the decency to include an 'off' function for the display. With a sick twist, though, they've incorporated the full-off position into a seven-level dimmer, as if merely toning it down makes it acceptable. But even fully darkened, you're faced with a gruesome green plastic-y panel. ARC should supply with the REF3 a brown paper bag.

Audio Research employs one of the most articulate and truly sane individuals I've ever met. But I purposely *didn't* phone Terry Dorn to ask

Here's a line-level pre-amplifier with a mountainous task to accomplish: replacing the sublime REF2 Mk II

buttons remain for power on/off, processor input, balanced or single-ended operation and mute. All the actions are now relegated to a remote control, working in cahoots with the biggest, ugliest alphanumeric display panel I've ever seen.

Don't get me wrong: I love British Racing Green. But preferably on a 1961 TR3A. This display, inescapably legible from across a room, shows volume level (numerically and via line graph), input, choice of BAL/SE, mute, mono and phase. But it's so truly, hideously, sphincter-clinchingly grotesque that you will thank ARC for

about the REF3's display. Why? Because he would respond with an utterly reasonable excuse for its presence. He would tell me something like the custom installers love it, or the customers they surveyed love it, or it sounds better, or any of a dozen rational justifications. His patience and decency would prevent him from simply calling me an 'asshole' and hanging up the phone.

Yet nothing will convince me it's better than 30-plus years' worth of highly-functional, ergonomically-perfect knobs and switches. Nor will anything convince me that 'the REF3 looks



Large green display shows volume level, input, choice of BAL/SE, mute, mono and phase. It can be switched off.

good.' Once you get past the front panel, you have a line-level pre-amp with a mountainous task to accomplish: replacing the sublime REF2 Mk II – now over four years old. ARC has kept the dimensions the same, at 19 x 7 x 15.5in (whd) plus handles, just in case any REF2 owner decides to upgrade, but has a specific slot of shelf to fill. Size aside, the REF3 is a completely new beast, and a REF2 cannot be upgraded to REF3 form.

One function that everyone will welcome, and which is unique to the display, is a read-out of the number of hours of valve usage. Because of this, I was actually able to chart the unit's burn-in period. It was fine from cold, if overly polite. Loosening up occurred at around 75-100 hours, it started singing at 300 hours, and was beyond

reproach when the read-out hit 350 hours. Which is around two weeks if you leave it on all the time – no big deal. But, should you wish to audition a REF3 in a shop, press the hours button first to ensure that you're hearing an optimised sample.

This being the 21st Century, the REF3 'will be easy to integrate with system controllers from companies like Creston or AMX.' Its inputs offer direct access, and there are discrete codes for power on/off, so this is one high-end, stereo valve pre-amp that you can incorporate into a cutting-edge multi-channel system with no loss of functionality. Its rear panel is the same as the REF2's, except for the deletion of the tape monitor input, so the REF3 does not have the facility for listening to one source while taping another. No

great loss, since I can't even remember the last time I heard the phrase 'three-head tape deck'. Other than that, the back is simply filled with both single-ended phono and XLR balanced inputs and outputs. I stuck with balanced operation throughout, from the outputs of the Marantz CD12/DA12 CD player to the McIntosh MC2102 power amplifier, driving Wilson WATT Puppy System 7 or LS3/5As. Another change is to 20A IEC mains connectors for the power cable, so you will have to use the supplied AC lead until you change the standard plug on your 'audiophile mains cable' for the large, rectangular type.

Despite its looks, the REF3 was one of my CES highlights back in January. It was obvious, even in a strange room with an unfamiliar system that the sound was so magical Merlin himself would surely buy one. And yet once I had one for review, I preferred to let it creep up on me, because I know that ARC hardware likes to settle into a system. So I listened to it casually, dipped in and out until the hours count was in the hundreds. But when it did grab me all of a sudden, after weeks of paying it scant attention, it was a full-on *coup de foudre* (foreplay notwithstanding), a conquest the sort of which ranks only with items like the Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage speaker or the London Reference cartridge. One minute, I'm humming along with it. The next, I'm bolt upright, muttering to myself, Damn, this is mighty fine.

Blame the J Geils Band. Recently, I'd been listening to *Sanctuary*, their underrated epic on EMI, in particular to the majestic 'I Can't Believe You' – a song that keeps on building and building. Its power and energy, layer upon layer of sound, were delivered with such total authority and command that words like 'visceral' and 'primal' can't even begin to describe the impact. I had the system cranked way up, and there was nary a trace of interference – no distortion, no compression, no clipping. Every sound had its

“ **When the guitars came in I sat there with the same 'shit-eating grin' I usually reserve for rides in cars I can't afford** ”

Inside the ARC

Inside, the REF3 is an entirely fresh design, including both the audio and the power supply circuits, which are based on four new circuit boards and two new transformers. As expected, though, the audio circuit is a pure valve, Class-A design with zero feedback, courtesy of four long-life 6H30P twin triodes. FETs are used for constant-current sources, while the analogue circuitry uses a long-tailed pair input stage to ensure the same performance in either single-ended or balanced modes.

ARC states that the REF3 provides total gain of 12dB balanced and 6dB single-ended. Its hybrid power supply 'has over 50% greater energy storage than its predecessors, greatly contributing to its tremendous dynamic

capability.' Bandwidth has increased from 60kHz to 500kHz and noise has been reduced by 12dB. As a result, headroom is said to be much higher, with the maximum input increased to 20V balanced, while 'distortion has been lowered by 40%.'

The power supply itself contains two valves, a 6L6GC and a 6H30P, with electronically regulated low and high voltage supplies.



IEC mains inlet (left) requires large plug type



Rear sports both RCA and balanced connections, but no tape monitor input as per the ARC REF2

space. Every transient was crisp. Textures that usually get lost in favour of the wall of sound were present in minute detail. But I just wasn't prepared for the last track, the rousing 'Jus' Can't Stop Me' and its marching boots opening.

No, this isn't an *hommage* to stormtroopers. It's just a beat. But it has weight, palpable weight that can sound like a certain scene from *Blazing Saddles* if not handled properly. For the first time ever outside of a live concert, I thought something was gonna burst. When the guitars and harmonica came in, it all held together. I sat there with the same 'shit-eating grin' I usually reserve for rides in cars I can't afford.

I turned to the other extreme: the near-cappella performance by The Judds of 'Don't Be Cruel' showed what the REF3 could do with that

The REF 3's switch-free fascia means that all but the basic functions are relegated to the remote control handset [right]



snapping bass guitar you *only* hear on C&W records. An underrated 'test' instrument, it taxes the lower registers, has overtones and harmonics way up the frequency ladder, and proffers complex transients that contain both the quick and the dull. Via the REF3, it was as chunky – and tangy – as a bowl of chilli.

Then I fed it some klezmer music to hear fast strings and faster woodwinds – their speed and

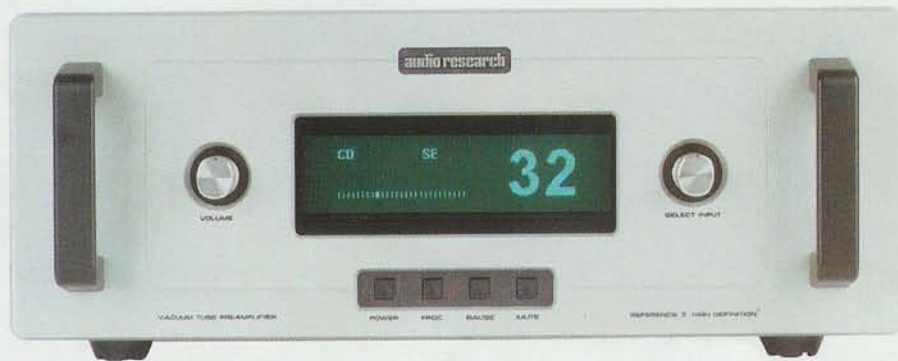
To put it bluntly, the REF3 is so open, airy and genuinely capable of creating a three-dimensional soundstage that it will confound tube haters who insist that valves can never be quiet enough to showcase low-level clues. Despite being as warm and cuddly as you want a valve product to be, the REF3 doesn't understand 'cloudy' or 'soggy'. Well-recorded orchestras, small, unplugged bluegrass ensembles, a cappella vocal acts, pristine mono masterpieces: the REF3 simply dials in the right space, like a plasma screen automatically selecting the correct aspect ratio. And it does it with ineluctable grace and finesse. I therefore have no hesitation in describing the Audio Research REF3 as the finest-sounding pre-amplifier I have ever tried in my own system.

Because the sound of the REF3 is so irresistible, I'm sure very few REF2 owners will keep theirs just because the '3 is also so accursedly ugly and cheap-looking. Equally, the sound is so bewitching that the £9250 price tag won't deter those with that kind of money hanging around uncommitted. But, as £9250 is nothing to sneeze at, would Audio Research consider supplying free-of-charge, for people with taste, an all-metal insert panel with ARC logo to hide the display? ■

Female voices in perfect harmony, the blending so authentic you could almost see Wynona's décolletage heaving

most delicate of instrumental pairings, two female voices in perfect harmony. The blending – it was sweet and syrupy but never cloying, so authentic you could almost see Wynona's décolletage heaving. Then George Strait's 'All My Ex's Live In Texas', dripping with that twangy, slapping,

complexity are taken in stride. You want drums? Back to the Geils effect: as with the marching feet, deep percussion is to the ARC what an open road is to a Porsche. But I've saved the best for last. What the REF3 does with spatial concerns is what makes the unit so close to ideal.



Supplier

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Hi-FiNews verdict

This is high-end sound at its most authoritative thanks to the sheer authority, airiness and finesse on tap here. The ARC comes at a price, but then currently there is little to touch it. Looks won't please all.